

## **LOCAL ELECTIONS MORE IMPORTANT THAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS FOR ALBANIANS**

*The International Institute for Middle-East and Balkan Studies (IFIMES) in Ljubljana, Slovenia, has prepared an analysis of the current political situation in Macedonia in the light of presidential and local elections which will be held on 22 March 2009. The most relevant and interesting sections from the comprehensive analysis entitled "Local elections more important than presidential elections for Albanians" are given below.*

### **MACEDONIA:**

In Macedonia the fifth local and fourth presidential elections will be held on 22 March 2009 since the country proclaimed independence on 8 September 1991. In total 1,792,082 voters will have the right to vote at the elections. A total of seven candidates will run in presidential election, four of them Macedonians, two Albanians and one Albanian woman-candidate. At the local elections, about 370 candidates will run for 85 mayor positions and about 11,000 candidates will run for some 1,200 functions in municipal assemblies.

Notably, almost 1,800,000 voters have been registered for the forthcoming elections while the total number of the population in Macedonia is just under 2,100,000. Thus the number of voters is about 20% smaller than the total population of the country. That points to the question of whether it is possible that only 20% of the population in Macedonia is younger than 18 or is this a typical example of an attempt to manipulate citizens' votes by registering as voters also those who are deceased and those who have not lived in Macedonia for a longer period of time and who have temporarily or permanently moved abroad.

### **WHO WILL BE THE NEW FIRST MAN IN MACEDONIA?**

At the presidential election seven candidates will run for the highest position in the state:

- Gorge Ivanov – the candidate of the currently ruling VMRO-DPMNE supported by ten small coalition parties,
- Ljubomir Frčkoski – the candidate of the opposition SDSM (Social Democratic Union of Macedonia) and NSDP (New Social Democratic Party – Tito Petkovski),
- Nano Ružin – Liberal Democratic Party's candidate,
- Ljube Boškoski – independent candidate),
- Agron Buxhaku – DUI (Democratic Union for Integration),
- Imer Selmani – New Democracy,

- Mirushe Hoxha – DPA (Democratic Party of Albanians).

According to recent surveys, VMRO-DPMNE's candidate Gorge Ivanov is the most likely to make it to the second round of the election where the fourth president of the Republic of Macedonia will be elected. In the public opinion polls he received between 25 and 30 % support. Since the beginning of the campaign Ivanov has had many problems with a clear presentation of his position regarding the president's authorities and he appeared to be rather confused in his public speeches. As presidential candidate of the ruling party Ivanov counts on its public rating, although for the first time during the past three years since VMRO-DPMNE is in power it has experienced a fall in its rating by as much as 10%.

Gorge Ivanov is a former social democrat (member of SDSM led by Branko Crvenkovski). His resignation from Crvenkovski's party in 2005 was not occasioned by ideological disagreements but because in 2005 his brother Blažo Ivanov, police commander at Gevgelija border crossing, was arrested for participating in criminal activities (smuggling migrants across Macedonian border). That was the only reason why Gorge Ivanov joined the neo-conservative leader of VMRO-DPMNE Nikola Gruevski.

Another candidate with realistic chances for entering the second round of presidential election is Ljubomir Frčkoski from the opposition SDSM. Other candidates such as Imer Selmani have no chances to enter the second round. Namely, the reality is that Macedonians are still not ready to support an Albanian candidate as president of their state. Undoubtedly, presidential candidate Selmani will win most votes among the Albanian constituency where he will defeat his opponents Agron Buxhaku from the ruling DUI and the only woman-candidate Mirushe Hoxha from the opposition DPA party. However, in his election campaign Imer Selmani is excessively trying to flatter the Macedonian constituency.

Liberal Democratic Party's candidate and former Macedonian ambassador to NATO Nano Ružin represents a pleasant refreshment in the presidential election. The former Macedonian Minister of the Interior and acquitted ICTY suspect Ljube Boškoski may win the votes of old VMRO-DPMNE members who regard Ivanov as a deserter from another party rather than their presidential candidate.

### **DUI TO WIN LOCAL ELECTIONS AGAIN**

For Albanian political parties presidential elections are not as interesting as local elections which will be in the focus of their interest. Their main fight at the local elections will be fought in Tetovo, Gostivar and in the Skopje municipality of Čair where the incumbent DUI mayor Izet Mexhiti will compete with the New Democracy's candidate Fatmir Etemi, former DPA deputy.

According to analysts' estimates DUI will win local elections again, like it did four years

ago. DPA has weakened, while New Democracy is still not profiled, well-organised and strong enough to compete with DUI structures.

In the Albanian political block the forthcoming local elections will be marked by the independent candidacy of a very popular former mayor of Gostivar Rufi Osmani, who will try to return to this position after 12 years since his term of office was interrupted by police intervention when he was arrested for raising Albanian flag in front of the Gostivar city hall. Other candidates for the mayor of Gostivar are the incumbent mayor Nevzat Bejta (DUI) and less known DPA's candidate Gazmend Aliji.

According to the IFIMES International Institute's estimates, Rufi Osmani represents a strong opponent to the incumbent mayor Bajt. When the DUI-prone electoral commission in Gostivar refused to approve Osmani's candidacy on grounds that he spent more than six months in prison, the decision provoked strong negative reactions among the citizens of Gostivar and some other cities. Grave concerns were expressed also by the representatives of international community in Macedonia who condemned the decision as an attack against democracy and the voting right. The competent court in Skopje nullified the decision on the legislative basis and enabled Osmani to join the election race.

### **TETOVO MAYOR HAZBI LIKA - THE FAVOURITE**

Tetovo is the centre of political life for Macedonian Albanians. At the forthcoming local elections a tense fight will be fought between the incumbent mayor of Tetovo Hazbi Lika (DUI) and DPA's candidate Sadi Bexheti, Chancellor of the University of Tetovo.

During the past four years of Hazbi Lika's term of office Tetovo has undergone some positive changes. This city with once non-functional infrastructure is gradually developing some better-regulated parts, although that is still far from the set goals. There is still much to be done, but the problem lies in insufficient financial resources and lack of interest from foreign sponsors to invest in the city. The greatest problem of this city under the Šara mountain is the lack of drinking water during summer periods.

DPA's candidate Sadi Bexheti comes from the Tetovo University which is known for grave financial malversations during the term of office of its previous Chancellor Nexhbedin Behadini. Under Bexheti's leadership the University opened its door to professors and students of Macedonian nationality as well as foreigners, which was a great step forward in improving the academic life and working conditions at the University. However, that will not be enough to persuade the citizens of Tetovo to elect Bexheti as their mayor.

### **DUI AND DPA TOGETHER AGAINST RUFI OSMANI?**

Bearing in mind the present situation in the cities of Tetovo and Gostivar, including Rufi Osmani's candidacy which may threaten the position of DUI in Gostivar, analysts

estimate and find it possible that a silent agreement on concealed co-operation may be concluded between DPA and DUI in Gostivar where in the second round, which will most probably be fought between Nevzat Bejta (DUI) and independent candidate Rofi Osmani, DPA would support DUI's candidate while DUI would leave Tetovo to DPA as compensation. However, the question is whether DUI would be ready to sacrifice Tetovo's mayor Hazbi Lika on behalf of Gostivar's Mayor and DUI Vice-President Nevzat Bejta?

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